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AUTHOR Rumberger, Russell W.
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ABSTRACT

Student mobility--students moving from one school to another for reasons other than being promoted to the next school level-is widespread in the United States. This digest examines the research on the academic consequences of mobility for elementary school students and discusses what schools and parents can do to mitigate the possible negative effects of changing schools. The digest notes that studies that do not control for the background characteristics of students consistently find that mobile students have lower achievement on average than non-mobile or stable students. Studies that do account for background differences, however, find that mobility may be more of a symptom than a cause of poor school performance. Other studies noted indicate that only frequent moves-three or more-predicted grade retention, and that mobility during elementary school as well as during high school diminishes the prospects for graduation. The digest then offers suggestions for helping to reduce unnecessary mobility and to mitigate its harmful effects at the district, school, and parent/student level. The digest concludes by noting that although a substantial body of research suggests that students may be affected psychologically, socially, and academically from changing schools, the impact of mobility depends on such factors as the number of school changes, when they occur, the reason for the changes, and the student's personal and family situation. (Contains 15 references.) (HTH)

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ERIC Digest

By

Russell W. Rumberger

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Student Mobility and Academic Achievement

Russell W. Rumberger

Student mobility—students moving from one school to another for reasons other than being promoted to the next school level—is widespread in the United States. Over their entire elementary and secondary careers, most students make at least one non-promotional school change (Rumberger et al., 1999). Many educators believe that student mobility is an inevitable result of students changing residences. Indeed, 2000 U.S. census data show that 15% to 18% of school-age children moved in the previous year (see http://www.census.gov/prod/2001pubs/p20-538.pdf). There have also been indications that welfare reform may affect moving, with parents moving to accept jobs.

However, research has also found that between 30% and 40% of school changes are not associated with residential changes (Kerbow, 1996; Rumberger et al., 1999). School factors such as overcrowding, class size reduction, suspension and expulsion policies, and the general academic and social climate also contribute to student mobility. The increase of parental options included in the No Child Left Behind legislation may also contribute over time to increased mobility. This Digest examines the research on the academic consequences of mobility for elementary school students and discusses what schools and parents can do to mitigate the possible negative effects of changing schools.

Research on Academic Achievement

Numerous studies have examined the impact of mobility on several aspects of academic achievement: test scores, grades, retention, and high school completion. As with all research studies, there are limitations to what these studies tell us. Most important, because mobile students may have personal and family problems that contribute to their mobility, studies should take into account those prior characteristics in order to determine whether mobility itself is the cause of subsequent achievement and other problems in schools.

Studies that do not control for the background characteristics of students consistently find that mobile students have lower achievement on average than non-mobile or stable students. For example, one national study of third-grade students found that frequent school changes were associated with a host of problems, including nutrition and health problems, below-grade-level reading scores, and retention in grade (U.S. General Accounting Office, 1994).

Yet studies that do account for background differences find that mobility may be more of a symptom than a cause of poor school performance. One study of mobile students in Chicago found that half of the achievement differences between mobile and stable students could be attributed to differences between the students that pre-dated their school changes (Temple & Reynolds, 1997). One well-designed study of elementary students in Baltimore found that although mobility during elementary school had a negative association with test scores, grades, retention, and referral to special education in fifth grade, the association was largely insignificant once controls were introduced for the family and academic performance in first grade (Alexander, Entwisle, & Dauber, 1996). In other words, mobile students came from poorer families and had lower academic performance before they were mobile, a finding supported by other studies (Nelson et al., 1996).

Several national studies have also examined the impact of student mobility on the academic performance of students across grade levels. These studies were based on a national health survey that provided controls for the demographic characteristics of students but not prior educational performance. These studies found that only frequent—three or more—family moves predicted grade retention (Simpson & Fowler, 1994; Wood et al., 1993). However, another study based on the same data found that even one residential move had a negative impact on a combined measure of both academic and behavioral aspects of school performance, although the negative association was found only among children who did not live with both biological parents (Tucker, Marx, & Long, 1998). The authors suggest that two-parent families may have more so-called "social capital" that can help mitigate the effects of residential mobility (Coleman, 1987).

Finally, there is strong evidence that mobility during elementary school as well as during high school diminishes the prospects for graduation. One study that tracked children from early childhood to young adulthood found that residential mobility reduced the odds of high school graduation even after controlling for a variety of family background variables (Haveman & Wolfe, 1994). Several studies based on the same national database of over 10,000 high school students found that school mobility between the first and eighth grades increased the odds of dropping out of school during high school even after controlling for eighth-grade achievement and other factors (Rumberger & Larson, 1998; Swanson & Schneider, 1999; Teachman, Paasch, & Carver, 1996).

What Can Be Done?

The answer to this question depends on how one views this phenomenon. Some mobility is viewed largely as a *strategic* activity initiated by students and their families to serve their own interests and educational preferences. And there may be little that can be done to prevent mobility when mobility is a result of families' decisions to change jobs or residences. In this case, the only response is perhaps to better inform students and parents about the possible problems that can result from changing schools and how to mitigate them.

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However, at least some mobility is neither strategic nor related to moving. Rather, both students and schools initiate student transfers in response to social as well as academic concerns. Consequently, much can and should be done both to prevent some types of mobility, especially those caused by school factors, and to mitigate some of the harmful effects from mobility.

Although not supported by formal research, experience suggests that schools and parents can help reduce unnecessary mobility and mitigate its harmful effects. Schools and districts can limit policies such as redistricting that contribute to unnecessary mobility. The most general yet potentially the most effective strategy to reduce mobility is to improve the overall quality of the school. Case studies have suggested that substantial and meaningful school reforms can dramatically reduce a school's student mobility rate. For example, in a three-year period, Hollibrook Accelerated School in Houston, Texas, reduced its student mobility rate from 104% to 47% (McCarthy & Still, 1993). School districts can also be flexible with school boundaries and provide transportation and other supports to help students in low-income families remain in their schools. Districts can also cooperate with each other to support transferring students.

In addition to these large-scale efforts, counselors, administrators, and other school staff can:

- Counsel students to remain in the school if at all possible. Staff can "problem solve" with a withdrawing student about how he or she could remain at least until the year end—for example, how the student could use public transportation or be transported by a family member if he or she moved out of the neighborhood.
- Prepare *in advance* for incoming transfer students and facilitate the transition of incoming transfer students *as soon as they arrive.*
- Establish *ongoing* activities and procedures to address the needs of new students.
- Assess the past enrollment history of incoming students, including the number of previous school changes, and closely monitor the educational progress of students with three or more previous school changes.

Parents and students may also be able to prevent unnecessary mobility as well as help mitigate the potentially harmful effects of mobility that may be necessary or desirable:

- Students and parents can attempt to resolve problems at school before initiating a school transfer.
- If possible, students can make school changes between semesters or at the end of the school year.
- When a transfer is made, parents should personally sign students into their new school and meet with a school counselor. They should also make sure that their child's school records are forwarded in a timely manner from their previous school.
- Parents should make a follow-up appointment with a school counselor and teachers two or three weeks after a transfer is made to see how their child is adjusting to the new school.

Conclusion

Although a substantial body of research suggests that students may be affected psychologically, socially, and academically from changing schools, the impact of mobility depends on such factors as the number of school changes, when they occur, the reason for the changes, and the student's personal and family situation.

For More Information

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